

Mr. Hugh Harris'
Oral History
Kennedy Space Center
Held on June 25, 2001

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Dr. Henry Dethloff,
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1 Roger Launius: My name is Roger Launius. It's the 25th of June 2001. We're doing an oral
2 history with Hugh Harris, former Chief of Public Affairs, I think that's the correct title.

3

4 Hugh Harris: Director.

5

6 Launius: Director of Public Affairs here at the Kennedy Space Center and we're in the
7 Kennedy Space Center Headquarters this morning. Around the table with me is Lisa Malone and
8 Henry Dethloff and Hugh Harris. Hugh, thanks for coming by. We very much appreciate your
9 willingness to participate in this oral history. I guess the first question we have is where were you
10 born? When were you born? How did you grow up? What were your parents doing? Those sorts
11 of basic questions.

12

13 Harris: Well, I was born in Cleveland and I don't remember a lot about it. But my mother was
14 a legal secretary and my father was a machinist and a draftsman and drove a truck for a while.
15 Worked in WPA. A lot of the things that happened to people during the thirties and of course I was
16 born in thirty-two. And,...was always interested in science and math and dramatics and writing
17 and I decided at a very early age that I was going to be a writer. After I read some of the Hugh
18 Lofting books and figured that my name was Hugh and therefore I could be a writer.

19

20 Launius: OK.

21

22 Henry Dethloff: Good reasoning.

23

1 {laughter}

2

3 Launius: Good reasoning. Where did you go to college?

4

5 Harris: Western Reserve University.

6

7 Launius: Oh, right there in Cleveland.

8

9 Harris: And then I went to graduate school at Columbia, but I ran out of money while I was at
10 Columbia so I didn't finish my MFA there.

11

12 Launius: Did you have any special interest in flight or rockets or airplanes when you were a kid
13 or going through college?

14

15 Harris: Well I was very interested in aircraft and of course NACA had the facility there at
16 Cleveland and the Cleveland air shows were out at that airport and I also had a, I think he was
17 cousin who worked at NACA and talked a little bit about it. So, I was somewhat interested in that.
18 I was interested probably even more in radio broadcasting and early television, which I was on,
19 and in writing. I did a lot of magazine articles when I was in my teens and while I was in college.

20

21 Launius: What kind of magazines?

22

23 Harris: Well, the most, the one that paid the best was Women's Day.

1 {laughter}

2

3 Launius: OK

4

5 Harris: They..

6

7 Launius: I think my mother used to subscribe.

8

9 Harris: But, the one that I sold the most to was called, Your Life, and it went out of business
10 which I trust was not related to my writing.

11

12 {laughter}

13

14 Launius: When you were a kid growing up in Cleveland, what was the perception of the Lewis
15 Research Center there? Was it viewed as something cool and cutting edge or did anybody really
16 think about it?

17

18 Harris: I don't think that people thought about it a whole lot. Possibly in other circles they
19 did, but not in the ones when I was in elementary school and high school certainly.

20

21 Launius: OK. All right. After you finished college what did you do from there?

22

23 Harris: Well actually the...I finished college after the Army so. . .

1 Launius: Oh, OK.

2

3 Harris: Well I started in radio when I was 13 and I had my own program in Cleveland from
4 the time I was about 14 to 18, which was a dramatic show that I did a lot of writing for and directed.
5 And we acted and it was on a commercial station there, although we didn't get paid. So when I got
6 to the Army, I had started college when I was 17 or 18. However, in those times the draft board
7 did not make allowances if you had to work full time while you went and I was one hour under full
8 time. They said, "Well, we're going to draft you. You may want to look around, see if you can get
9 a good deal before we do that." But I ended up going into the Army because you could get in for
10 two years then.

11

12 Launius: OK.

13

14 Harris: And while I was in the Army I was sent to Germany and went out and interviewed and
15 got a job in public affairs doing radio programs to send back to this country.

16

17 Dethloff: While you were in the service?

18

19 Harris: Right. And then when I came back I finished college. And then I went on to
20 Columbia and when I ran out of money there I got a job at a radio station in New Jersey in news
21 and as a disk jockey and various other things that go along with that.

22

1 Launius: OK. All right. When did you, let's see, I think that you went to Lewis Research Center
2 fairly early.

3

4 Harris: Well in '63 I had been out of, I had graduated from college in '57, and after working at
5 the radio station and a couple of newspapers then I came back to Cleveland and worked at
6 Standard Oil of Ohio as a writer for their internal and external house organs. And then they were
7 having a massive layoff at Standard Oil of Ohio [which] was really what prompted me to look
8 around. I was offered a job immediately at the Federal Reserve Bank in Cleveland and when they
9 made the offer I said, "Well, I'd rather go to work for NASA." And they said, "Well, we understand
10 that, but if that doesn't work out then let us know and if we haven't filled the job then we'll be happy
11 to have you." So that was very nice of them and however NASA did come through a month or so
12 later, and...so I went to work in, I think, February 2nd of '63.

13

14 Launius: Oh..'63

15

16 Harris: '63...'63.

17

18 Launius: What did you like so much about NASA? Was there anything in particular that struck
19 you? I mean you had a choice of a couple of jobs there.

20

21 Harris: Well actually I initially thought that I would spend about a year at NASA and learn
22 everything I could and then go back into the media as a specialist in the space program...

23

1 Launius: Oh, OK.

2

3 Harris: ...and in aeronautics. However the people at Lewis and the ones that I met
4 elsewhere were so excited about what they were doing. And I really came to believe that it was
5 probably the most important thing that was going on in the world at that time. So, naturally, I
6 wanted to be a part of it and I stayed for 35 years.

7

8 Launius: All right. All right. I got a couple of, kind of general questions. Sputnik. When it went
9 up in 1957, as a historian we read about it, and we read about the kind of furor it generated among
10 the public. What's your recollection of it? I mean you weren't associated with NACA in those days
11 or space flight in general. Did it have a resonance? Was there something about this that was
12 exceedingly news worthy? Did it excite people?

13

14 Harris: No, I wasn't terribly surprised, I mean, Eisenhower, and of course then the Soviets as
15 well had announced back in '55, or anyway before, long before that, that they were going to orbit
16 satellites and I had been interested in rockets somewhat all my life. I used to build little ones when
17 I was...well, younger than a teenager. And there was a lot of exciting articles even back in the
18 forties, even late thirties, in Popular Mechanics, Popular Science, about what was being done by
19 rocket clubs. And rocket clubs around the world really, I think, and probably mostly in Germany
20 and some in this country did more in those days than the governments were doing or at least
21 talked about. So, anyway, I wasn't surprised when it happened. And I wasn't very upset by it,
22 because I figured that we probably were not very far behind in that.

23

1 Launius: OK. When you joined NASA in '63 we were in the middle of the moon race.
2 Kennedy had announced just a couple of years before that we were going to land an American on
3 the Moon by the end of decade. And so forth...Everybody knows the story. Lewis really, I mean it
4 had some things associated with the lunar landing but it was largely an aeronautics program.
5 What was the situation there when you arrived?

6

7 Harris: Well, actually Lewis had a lot to do with the Apollo program, because Lewis really
8 was one of the pioneers in the use of liquid hydrogen and Abe Silverstein, who was the director at
9 Lewis at the time I was hired there, was probably one of the deciding factors in the use of liquid
10 hydrogen. Von Braun was not...

11

12 Launius: He didn't like it.

13

14 Harris: . . . originally interested in it. And, you can understand [that feeling] from its volatility.
15 [However], at Lewis they had flown aircraft with hydrogen long before that, and they ended up
16 taking over the Centaur program. So there was a lot going on at that time and major contributions.
17 When the main engines on the Saturn V exhibited too much of the pogo effect and instability that
18 they had, Lewis was...I'm not sure exactly who all worked on it, but I know Lewis was a major
19 factor in solving that and getting it back on track.

20

21 Launius: OK. All right.

22

23 Harris: But anyway, I forgot what your original question was. I digressed a little bit there.

1 {laughter}

2

3 Launius: The original question was, what were the major things that you were doing when you
4 went into Lewis in 1963?

5

6 Harris: Well the first thing I did the...matter of fact the end of the first week I was there and
7 for weeks and weeks after that I went out on the road recruiting because NASA was in a
8 tremendous buildup and looking for talented engineers and scientists. So I spent a few days trying
9 to find out everything I could about what was good about the program and I went out on the road
10 with recruiters to strange places. You know, little towns and big towns.

11

12 Dethloff: Yeah, such as? I was just curious.

13

14 Harris: Well, I don't remember...

15

16 Dethloff: Colleges, universities?

17

18 Harris: Well, we did go to some of the colleges and universities, but we actually went into
19 towns and held press conferences and talked to people. That was not associated at all with the
20 colleges. Just spreading the word we were looking for engineers and I think that one of the places
21 we went was Lima, Ohio. For some reason that pops into my head and I could be wrong. But we
22 went to a whole bunch of small towns as well as some larger ones.

23

1 Launius: And what were you doing? I mean you were obviously recruiting. Did you hire them
2 on the spot? Did you have interviews and take resumes back?

3

4 Harris: Well they did interviews and took resumes back, but in many cases they sort of told
5 them that they were interested in hiring them and that they'd be getting an initial offer. And for civil
6 service there's still some paperwork you have to go through. But yes, it was very fast. As a matter
7 of fact, it was so fast that one of the things that happened to me was that I discovered that I was
8 eligible for the next higher grade three months after I was hired at the lower grade. Which was
9 very annoying, but...

10

11 {laughter}

12

13 Launius: Yeah.

14

15 Harris: But anyway, things were moving very fast in those days and NASA was building up.

16

17 Launius: Now you were working in Public Affairs at Lewis?

18

19 Harris: Right.

20

21 Launius: What were some of the ...you had a background in radio and other things. What
22 kinds of public affairs functions did you handle at Lewis, when you first came aboard?

23

1 Harris: Well everything that had to do with the press activities...

2

3 Launius: OK.

4

5 Harris: And also with things like exhibits. For instance I spent a month getting ready for the
6 '64 World's Fair in New York.

7

8 Launius: Oh yeah.

9

10 Harris: I got sent off to help get that set up and publicized and that sort of thing.

11

12 Launius: NASA had a big exhibit there?

13

14 Harris: Huge.

15

16 Launius: Really?

17

18 Harris: Yeah, It was, I can't remember how many acres it was, but...

19

20 Launius: Wow.

21

22 Harris: ...it included things like the boattail from a Saturn V which had been built at Marshall.
23 And, you know, full scale rockets and just a lot of exhibits. We had in those days—there weren't a

1 lot of astronauts—there were some, but we had a lot of the X-15 people like Joe Engle for instance
2 who was one of the people who came through and met with the media and with the...well the
3 officials there for the fair and some of the dignitaries. Von Braun came down and there was a
4 whole group of NASA management that came. But it was a lot of fun. It was very exciting.

5

6 Dethloff: I bet that was.

7

8 Harris: And interesting in trying to get something like that together.

9

10 Launius: Right. When people came through this I mean...was there all of the oohhing and
11 ahhhing and this is really neat and cool? I mean a lot of positive sort of...

12

13 Harris: Oh absolutely. In those days, you know, NASA was a prestige name that people
14 wanted to have them there. I mean the fair contributed the area, I mean, they charged everybody
15 else...

16

17 Launius: Right.

18

19 Harris: ...but they contributed to NASA and there was a tremendous amount of help that
20 came from the people at the fair in the setup and in working out any problems that occurred. They
21 were just very pleased to have NASA there. And it was one of the best attended parts of the fair
22 when you took a look overall. Some of the ones were capable of moving a lot of people through

1 their exhibits on people movers of one sort or another. But NASA certainly had a high percentage
2 of the people coming through their area.

3

4 Launius: Do any particular incidents stand out in your mind from that World's Fair? I mean its
5 kind of a benchmark in history in terms of how people measure the post World War II 20th century.

6

7 Harris: Well...the...one thing that stands out probably because I was in Public Affairs was
8 that Newsweek Magazine devoted I think it was several pages to the NASA part of the Fair and a
9 lesser number to all the rest of the Fair.

10

11 {laughter}

12

13 Harris: So it was...so for comparing the sizes of the things, NASA certainly got a lot of very
14 good publicity out of it.

15

16 Launius: Was the NASA exhibit really oriented toward Apollo or was it just everything?

17

18 Harris: Well...it was,...as I recall, there was a bit of everything, but it was heavier on the
19 Apollo and on the future than it was on everything else.

20

21 Launius: So did they try to make predictions about what we would be...you know flying cars
22 and things like that?

23

1 Harris: No, well it had flying cars before that.

2

3 Launius: Well yeah.

4

5 {laughter}

6

7 Harris: They never caught on, but...

8

9 {laughter}

10

11 Harris: But they were fun.

12

13 {laughter}

14

15 Launius: Let's talk a little bit about media relations during the Apollo era. You were at Lewis, I
16 think, virtually the whole time until the seventies. I think...

17

18 Harris: Well...'til '75 when I moved out.

19

20 Launius: Right. And...there is a perception that exists, which may be an incorrect perception,
21 that NASA had wonderful relations with the media then and has strained relations with the media
22 today. And I think it's a misperception anyway. How would you characterize the relations to
23 television, radio, and so forth...various journalists?

1 Harris: Well I think that NASA has had a outstanding relationship with the media throughout
2 its history, virtually, with a few bumps in the road. Of course the Apollo I fire was one bump and
3 Challenger was another. But by and large I think that NASA has had a more personal and a closer
4 relationship with the people that cover it than any other government agency. You had more people
5 being assigned certainly during Apollo than probably on Shuttle. On the other hand I think that it
6 balances out from time to time. I guess I would say off-hand, that the relationship has always been
7 one of having to...whenever a new reporter came on board...of having to teach them what was
8 happening and what it was all about and...and somehow give them a sense of history because
9 everything that NASA has done has been building on...really what has gone before in many cases
10 going back into NACA days and... into the military areas and so there's not too much that springs
11 out suddenly as a big surprise in the NASA program. But the relationship I think is enhanced by
12 the fact that there has to be a great deal of teaching done with the reporters and the reporters rely
13 fairly heavily on what we're able to bring to them in terms of information and people to talk to for
14 background. So I think that the relationship has been enhanced because of the fact that it's not
15 something you can actually prepare for as a reporter as easily as for general things.

16

17 Launius: OK....I'm sorry go ahead.

18

19 Lisa Malone: Well, weren't you coming down to KSC while you were at Lewis? Helping out during
20 launches?

21

22 Harris: Oh yeah. As a matter of fact for Apollo 11 I spent a month at JSC and...if you listen to
23 old tapes and stuff I was doing a lot of the radio beepers and...what we called the code a phone at

1 that time, well I guess they still call it the code a phone. But that company is not being used as
2 much. So...I came down to KSC for a couple of the Apollos. And I spent a lot of time...in those
3 days, we probably,...in Public Affairs when I say we,...traveled to other centers more often to
4 support what was going on and we deployed troops wherever they were needed from some of the
5 other centers.

6

7 Launius: So lots of people from the centers came down here for the launches . . .

8

9 Harris: Right.

10

11 Launius: . . . and worked those.

12

13 Harris: They more so than...

14

15 Launius: Than today.

16

17 Harris: ...than in recent years. Although at the beginning of Shuttle we had an awful lot from
18 other centers coming too.

19

20 Launius: When was the first time that you came down for one of the launches to work the
21 public affairs?

22

1 Harris: Well, probably in '63. I came down to...see Lewis was responsible for the Atlas
2 Centaur, for the Atlas Agena, and for the Thor Agena, and for a number of vehicles. And a rather
3 intricate division of responsibilities, but it had management responsibilities for those vehicles. So I
4 would go to Vandenberg when we were launching from there and come down to KSC and go to
5 Wallops Island, wherever we were involved. And I used to do a lot of the commentary on the
6 launches out at Vandenberg. Here at KSC they didn't let me do that because the KSC people did
7 that...

8

9 {laughter}

10

11 Harris: And which I think was entirely appropriate when I got down here.

12

13 {laughter}

14

15 Harris: But...for some reason KSC...well there was a strange relationship between the
16 various centers and the launches out at Vandenberg, so it was not real clear who was in charge of
17 what especially as far as public affairs was concerned. So when I was at Lewis I took charge
18 when I went to Vandenberg. It was just the sensible thing to do.

19

20 Launius:there was obviously a lot of public interest in what was taking place here at the
21 Cape.

22

23 Harris: Absolutely.

1 Launius: Especially for the human launches.

2

3 Harris: Right.

4

5 Launius: Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo. I think the question that Henry wanted to pursue with
6 you a little bit is...what was the process, and I think it had probably evolved over time in terms of
7 the management of the media, the public, and so forth for the launches in the 1960's. I don't know
8 how much knowledge you may have of that since you were kind of brought in to help out, but it's
9 probably a reasonable assumption to suggest that it was fairly ad-hoc in the beginning and
10 became more and more complex and rigorous as time progressed. I don't know if you have any
11 perceptions of that or not.

12

13 Harris: Well..., I don't think it was so much ad hoc.

14

15 Launius: OK.

16

17 Harris: It was always fairly well planned and the things that we did in the way of press kits
18 and fact sheets and that sort of thing back then were probably more extensive than what's done
19 today.

20

21 Launius: OK.

22

1 Harris: And you're right about the interest. For instance when I came down here from Lewis
2 for unmanned launches...I would have a long list of radio stations in the Cleveland area and
3 sometimes Detroit, Chicago, various other places, which I called from down here and did, you
4 know, either interviews or actualities, matter of fact I can remember doing a great many things right
5 at the time that the launch was occurring and. . . described it like a radio reporter would and got the
6 sound of the launch and that sort of thing which sometimes I faked, but the...

7

8 {laughter}

9

10 Harris: But then played it over phone lines to the radio station. It wasn't exactly high tech,
11 but the radio stations and even the TV stations, in some cases, were happy to have somebody on
12 the spot who would report directly to them about what was happening. So it was always busy even
13 though I wasn't based here. The people who were in our area knew that I would be here or that
14 somebody from Lewis would be here. Actually, I think I was the only one who did a lot of the radio
15 stuff, but...then we would call them and they would broadcast it. Whereas today you get short
16 things in the national news sometimes and frequently very short things and practically nothing
17 about the unmanned launches. There was quite a lot on...every launch. It was an occasion...and
18 of course every launch usually slipped in...

19

20 Launius: Right

21

1 Harris: ...those days, too. I spent several Thanksgivings down here, because you'd come
2 down a week or two before and it'd just slip day by day. They'd say "Well, we're going to try again
3 two days from now" well, it didn't make economic sense to go...

4

5 Launius: Right.

6

7 Harris: ...back and then come back again. And the airline schedules are not as good as
8 they are today either. People were very excited and of course as far as the general public was
9 concerned KSC had 60 to 70 thousand people in here to watch Apollo launches. Whereas that got
10 cut drastically in the name of safety and other management considerations after we got into the
11 Shuttle era.

12

13 Launius: You were talking about the slips. Did the journalists covering the launches, they had
14 full understanding of that. That was acceptable to them or did they grouse about it?

15

16 Harris: Well, I mean we all groused about it, ok...

17

18 {laughter}

19

20 Harris: But I think everybody...

21

22 Launius: They recognized it.

23

1 Harris: Yeah and it did get reported. It wasn't that they said, "Oh well, you know, we won't
2 say anything until it goes." In the early days there was an agreement between the Air Force and
3 the reporters that nothing was reported until there was fire in the tail of the rocket and that was
4 good because if it blew up there'd been fire there and they could report it, but after NASA took
5 over...and that was not a...a real clean transition. Langley initially was responsible, pretty much
6 for the flight stuff happening, and it was awhile after NASA was formed before the Marshall people
7 really came on board and there was a transfer of the ballistic missile agency segment over...

8

9 Launius: Right.

10

11 Harris: ...it to become Marshall. So it was not entirely a clean transition there. So anyway,
12 ...to make a long story short there was probably greater camaraderie between the Public Affairs
13 people and the media in those days. There were frequently parties if there was a slip then
14 somebody would have a party and everybody would get together and...it was really a very collegial
15 type of atmosphere. Not that anybody ever forgot who they worked for, but...nevertheless ...there
16 was a lot of closeness there.

17

18 Malone: Do you remember the tone of the coverage back then compared to Shuttle or today
19 of the space program?

20

21 Harris: Well,...yes....I mean, sometimes it was very sharp. Bill Hines for instance of the
22 Washington Post and then later the Chicago Sun Times, I think.

23

1 Malone: It was Chicago Sun Times on the Shuttle program I remember, but he might have
2 worked at the Post at one time.

3

4 Harris: He had written a lot of stories about Centaur in particular and his [lead for the] story
5 about the first successful Centaur launch was...“The Turkey of the Space Age got up and Flew
6 Today”. So ...it was not...

7

8 {laughter}

9

10 Harris: I mean this is not something that was calculated to make the managers real happy...

11

12 Launius: Right.

13

14 Harris: ...necessarily. On the other hand they...yeah...they did write about the slips, but
15 they were ecstatic about the successes and they were quite honest about when things went wrong.

16

17 Launius: You just mentioned this story about Centaur. Did Public Affairs ever try to respond to
18 this...or did the managers, who wouldn't have been very happy with this, want you to do anything
19 about it?

20

21 Harris: Sometimes.

22

23 Launius: OK.

1 {laughter}

2

3 Harris: It depended. I can remember when on, AC 5, Atlas Centaur 5 was a particularly
4 devastating explosion and Abe Silverstein immediately said, "Don't release any pictures." And we
5 had to persuade him that that was not sensible. It had happened in front of a whole lot of people.
6 There were a lot of pictures out there. Nothing was to be gained by not releasing pictures. And
7 actually he came to believe in an even more open program than he originally did. But anybody
8 who has a program which has spectacular failures in it probably feels a little bit like, "Gee, I wish
9 nobody would see that."

10

11 Launius: Yeah. Nobody likes to see it on TV, but . . .

12

13 Harris: But, on the other hand very rarely did somebody say we want you to do something
14 about that. I mean, we tried very hard to make managers understand that NASA does not control
15 the press. I mean, really...a lot of them thought we did and that was our job, controlling the press.
16 And...

17

18 Launius: They still feel that way.

19

20 {laughter}

21

22 Harris: ...and, that's not the way it works. I've always had the philosophy that you treat the
23 press as professionals and honestly and as openly as is possible to do. And that it doesn't matter

1 whether things are going wrong or right, you treat them exactly the same both times and it's going
2 to make the good times better and the bad times not as bad if you do it that way.

3

4 Launius: OK.

5

6 Malone: I wanted to see if there were any particular reporters that you remember. Some of
7 the personalities types though...

8

9 Harris: Oh lots of them...of course Bill Hines was one of them. He was always very gruff
10 and he was an excellent writer, very insightful and good background in science.

11

12 Malone: How about Jules Bergman. Did you meet him?

13

14 Harris: Oh Jules Bergman. Oh, yeah did I meet him. I spent a lot of time with Jules. Matter
15 of fact, I tried to loan you to Jules...

16

17 {laughter}

18

19 Harris: ...because I thought that it would be good for you to be at ABC for a few months as
20 part of your growing...and that never worked out unfortunately. There were a few impediments
21 and Headquarters was not, well Headquarters said nice things about the thing in theory. They
22 never really went out of their way to help make these things happen and there wasn't any model
23 for how you do this. There wasn't any sort of standard agreement we could sign with the network

1 in which this went on and Jules had agreed that in that particular case that he would loan us one of
2 the people who worked with him in the news area and so that they would have gotten some good
3 experience here. That was not without some risk in some people's minds at Headquarters.
4

5 Malone: But was he always here covering the launches?
6

7 Harris: Frequently he was here covering launches and, and in later years he sometimes
8 came to a lot more of the unmanned things as his responsibilities at the network went down. And
9 during the later years...he had a very difficult time in putting together three or four sentences at
10 any one time. And we spent hours sometimes helping him get through a piece out at either the
11 VAB or out at the Pad or somewhere. There were people who really felt that he should be
12 positioned in the flame trench during launches, but...
13

14 {laughter}
15

16 Harris: Because...he was sometimes a little difficult to get along with. And there was one
17 time
18

19 Launius: The ultimate exclusive.
20

21 {laughter}

22 Malone: We still joke about putting a few of them down there.
23

1 {laughter}

2

3 Harris: Yeah, I know. But he was one of the real characters. Actually, he was a very bright
4 person who had very good background in science and in aeronautics in particular and quite a good
5 reporter. But he always felt that he was probably the best person that was there as far as the
6 reporting was concerned and that his job was not necessarily to make anybody look good, but to
7 poke pins in whatever he perceived as being inflated. But he was a fairly honest person and very
8 interesting. Yeah, he was certainly one of the characters. But there were many others and I'm
9 having a hard time... Actually, some of them are still around. There's been tremendous longevity
10 in some of the reporter ranks. You know, people like Jim Slade for instance, who has been
11 around...I mean, he retired and then he came back after we honored him by putting his name on
12 the wall at the press site. And...that was something which is also a little bit controversial in some
13 quarters. It was something that was bought off by Dan Goldin at the time and by I think, Lori Bater,
14 might have been the associate administrator at that time, but it was something we had brought up
15 here. One of the things that happens in the news world is that reporters can spend their whole life
16 and rarely get recognized by their organizations for what they're doing. Other than, of course they
17 get paid and, in some cases, they may even get bonuses, although that's pretty rare in the news
18 business. And I know that they're very, very proud of what they have done and feel that they are
19 making a major contribution and actually are a part of what's going on. That's a little dangerous in
20 a reporter because its not really the case. Their role is to communicate and to help the rest of the
21 world who can't be at whatever location [to] understand what's going on and why it's important or
22 why it's not important and in some cases, especially during Challenger, they felt that they were
23 [partially] responsible because they [might] not [have] been as good a reporter as they should have

1 been. And that was very hard on many of them. Of course, a lot of us in Public Affairs felt if we
2 had done something [different] that maybe that wouldn't have happened too. But in any case...the
3 ones who ended up being honored on the wall out at the press site were tremendously
4 appreciative and in many cases said that was the only time that their work had really been
5 recognized. And I felt at the time that we conceived the idea that it was one way that we could tell
6 reporters, I mean show reporters who were coming along that NASA valued what they were doing.
7 It of course would be unethical for us to do anything with a reporter who is actually working
8 because the perception is that you're trying to buy them or trying to make them less objective.
9 However, once they've retired I don't think there's anything that's unethical in that and I think that it
10 does demonstrate that they are an important part of what NASA does, because if people don't
11 know what NASA does then we're not going to be able to do it much longer in the future.

12

13 Dethloff: Relating to that, this is a very broad question, but would you say that NASA's relation
14 to the press, the media, the public in general has been primarily responsive, reactive, or proactive
15 over time?

16

17 Harris: Well, that's...

18

19 Dethloff: I've got the sense that you've almost been overwhelmed sometimes with the
20 remarkable public interest and demand.

21

22 Harris: Well that's true and we used to argue about that among ourselves all of the time and
23 we kept saying we should be proactive and that was something that I always tried to do when I

1 was out at the press site or when I was here in this building as a deputy director and director. And
2 it's very difficult to do because there [are] never enough people to be responsive to the demands
3 and also to be proactive. And, for several years we tried to put out... about three major articles to
4 Sunday supplements every year and we marketed them the same way that a freelancer would
5 market them in sending out a query letter saying that we have this available. Of course we didn't
6 ask them for money, which [was] attractive to some publications, but...what that requires is that
7 one that you have people who are quite good writers on your staff who can do professional writing
8 and that they're motivated to do it and one of the problems is that with lack of being able to recruit
9 people or hire people through the years and Public Affairs has been hampered for twenty to thirty
10 years. I mean...we were really lucky to get Lisa for instance as a co-op and I think that she was
11 one of the last ones, but ...let's see Mitch came after you and there have been one more or
12 something, but, Public Affairs always was being told "No, you can't have anymore co-ops, etc.".
13 And, on the other hand, even worse, they say when there was a position open you can hire, but
14 you have to do it from inside the Center, [however] I think that everybody has worked out well in
15 the long run. Some directors with the blessing of The Director, would say, "We want you to have
16 this person." So we got a lot of people from other places on the Center and then you had to figure
17 out how can they best be used to get the work done. But they weren't professional writers. They
18 weren't broadcasters. Getting somebody as a co-op though who at least is studying it in the
19 school, was one of the best things that we could do. And in the case of Lisa it worked out
20 tremendously well. But that doesn't always work out even in the co-op area.

21 Dethloff: Thank you.

22

1 Launius: Well let's go back to Apollo for a couple of minutes and talk about a couple of the key
2 events. You were up at Lewis, but when did you first hear about the Apollo fire and what was the
3 Public Affairs approach to dealing with...up to that point...the most serious crisis in NASA's
4 history.

5

6 Harris: Well, yeah, you're right. I didn't have a whole lot to do with that. I heard about it on
7 the news as I was...I know I was in my car and I heard it on the radio. But...as I recall...and we
8 were almost immediately told any information is going to come from...and I think that we were told
9 from Headquarters. So I really can't tell you a whole lot about that particular incident. I know that
10 from talking to the media, that there was a fair amount of unhappiness with the speed at which
11 NASA responded. On the other hand NASA did respond reasonably well. It was just that the fire
12 occurred at a time when it was not being covered. There weren't a lot of press sitting around
13 covering the test that was going on. It was a fairly routine test.

14

15 Launius: Right.

16

17 Harris: Which of course didn't turn out that way.

18

19 Launius: Right.

20

21 Harris: But...it's exactly the same thing practically that happened during Challenger.
22 Whenever you have things go wrong, the mindset of an engineer, and almost everybody involved

1 in management etc. have been engineers, is that we don't want to say anything until we know the
2 whole story.

3

4 Launius: Right.

5

6 Harris: And that's not exactly the way that you can work because there are things that you
7 do know and they're not going to change. And...if you're going to have a program like the NASA
8 program which is a fairly high profile type of program, you have got to be forthcoming with what's
9 going on and talk about, here's what happened that we know. We will get back to you as soon as
10 we know more about it. The media and the general public understand that you don't instantly
11 know everything, but they don't understand if you don't tell them anything....or if you try to cover it
12 up. And NASA has been really very good in not covering things up.

13

14 Launius: Right.

15

16 Harris: Other than possibly cost overruns.

17

18 {laughter}

19

20 Launius: We won't go there.

21

22 {laughter}

23

1 Harris: I'm retired now.

2

3 {laughter}

4

5 Launius: Let's talk about Apollo 11 for a moment. The launch apparently was one of the
6 biggest events that ever took place in KSC history.

7

8 Harris: Oh, absolutely.

9

10 Launius: More people came to see it. More media were here. What was your role? What
11 were you doing?

12

13 Harris: Well I was at JSC for a month in connection with Apollo 11. Got there a couple of
14 weeks before and stayed through the mission and on a little bit after that and...and my first
15 impression was it's one of the hottest places in the world there.

16

17 {laughter}

18

19 Launius: The most muggy.

20

21 Harris: And not the place I would really want to live in.

22

23 {laughter}

1 Harris: But aside from that, there was just an unbelievable amount of phone traffic. And of
2 course since I was in the area, I was handling phone traffic from radio stations and from
3 newspapers and that sort of thing, that's what I would naturally home in on. And there was a
4 tremendous number of press who were in the area. Not nearly as many as were down here of
5 course, but there were quite a few there. And from the time you got to work until the time you left
6 you almost didn't have time to figure out what was happening cause you were reporting on it all of
7 the time. And I know that one of the things that we a lot of trouble with was what did Neal
8 Armstrong say. Did he say "A man" or did he say "man" and it was obvious we listened to those
9 tapes maybe twenty, thirty times before we decided that he did not say "A". But anyway...

10

11 Launius: And he has had finally admitted that.

12

13 Harris: Yeah, right.

14

15 {laughter}

16

17 Launius: So he basically said I flubbed the line.

18

19 Harris: Well he had obviously thought about that before he went up. And it would have been
20 nice if they had written it out, then we could have said, "Here's what he said." But that's not the
21 way that works.

1 Launius: How did the...I mean, from what I've seen in terms of the newspaper reporting and
2 what I've seen in public opinion polls and so forth from that particular time, there was just this
3 enormous sense of pride that we were actually able to do this.

4

5 Harris: Right.

6

7 Launius: And, was that the perception that you got...

8

9 Harris: Oh absolutely. And I think that was pervasive across the world actually. I think
10 people even if they lived in Bangladesh or someplace felt that this was a human achievement, not
11 just a US achievement. So it was a tremendous, I think, boost for humankind. And of course from
12 that sprang the saying, "Well if you can put man on the moon, why can't you do whatever it is?"
13 And of course the answer to that always is, if you have the people with the background dedicated
14 to doing whatever it is, probably you can do it.

15

16 Launius: In the long term commitment.

17

18 Harris: Right.

19

20 Launius: Along those lines...oh...OK, let's take a couple of minutes, and she's going to
21 change tapes. Is that right? OK. And when we come back I want to ask you, when was the first
22 time you heard that "If we can land a man on the moon why can't we...". I'm trying to trace the
23 genesis of that.

1 {laughter}

2

3 Harris: I think it happened almost immediately.

4

5 Launius: Yeah. The first instance I saw it was '68 actually. In a New York Times story, but I
6 think it became...I mean, it's become ubiquitous.

7

8 Harris: Right.

9

10 Launius: Just like the rocket scientist's comment. It's not rocket science.

11

12 Harris: It's not rocket science. And I like those ads that say it is rocket science.

13

14 {laughter}

15

16 Harris: About air conditioners or something. Anyway. You know.

17

18 PART II

19

20 Launius: Are we good? OK. We're back for the second hour talking to Hugh Harris. It's the
21 25th of June 2001. And when we broke a moment ago we were talking a little bit about Apollo 11
22 and...just to kind of conclude that...its become ubiquitous. Did you get that on tape? I don't think
23 you did. I think you turned off the tape before then. But, its become ubiquitous that we use terms

1 like, "If we can land a man on the moon or if we can go to the moon, why can't we," and you can fill
2 in the blank. And I'm just curious when you may have heard that for the first time.

3

4 Harris: Well, in between tapes I was trying to remember when I heard that.

5

6 {laughter}

7

8 Harris: And, seems to me that I heard it relatively immediately, I really can't remember,
9 and... I when say relatively immediately I mean within the next few months or six month period, but
10 I really could not pinpoint it.

11

12 Launius: OK. All right. And, one final question that I've got about Apollo and that has to do
13 with the...what I contend is a really poor, poorly documented and a very poor job of reporting on
14 this Apollo, this so called Apollo Moon Hoax. I don't know if you've heard about it or seen it, but
15 there is a growing number of people who say we never went to the moon. It was all a big lie.

16

17 Harris: There's a huge number of people who say that there was no Holocaust, too.

18

19 Launius: That's true.

20

21 Harris: I mean you're going to have that sort of thing happen and I don't think that other than
22 presenting the facts and teaching it in school and that sort of thing. I'm not sure there's a lot you

1 can do about that. You know people have their own agendas as to why they say things like that,
2 usually it's a self serving one.

3
4 Launius: Yeah, Fox news did a one-hour special.

5
6 Harris: Oh, really.

7
8 Launius: Yeah. It's now aired three times.

9
10 Harris: Oh nuts. I didn't see that.

11
12 Launius: It's just horrible as far as I'm concerned. And there's no attempt at balance. It's not a
13 news program as far as I can tell. But it's very much in the mode of, if you saw several years ago,
14 the Fox alien autopsy stuff. The same kind of thing.

15
16 {laughter}

17
18 Launius: And I've been polling people who were associated with Apollo and just ask them the
19 question "Could this have been faked?"

20
21 Harris: I don't think there's anyway it could have been faked. And certainly the people who
22 went to the moon I think are the very best advertisements for that fact. But I once had somebody
23 who appeared at our front gate at Lewis and insisted that the Surveyor had not landed either on

1 the moon. And I really wanted to go talk to him about it and Security assured me I was not going
2 to do that and they took care of it.

3

4 {laughter}

5

6 Launius: OK, All right, fine. Before we move you down here in the mid 1970's are there any
7 particular incidents or people that you would like to mention about your experience at Lewis
8 Research Center.

9

10 Harris: Well, I think that there's a tremendous number, and I certainly do not remember all of
11 the names, but people like Irv (Irving) Pinkle made major, major contributions. He was in the fluid
12 area, but he was on the Board that investigated the Apollo 1 fire and certainly they had a major
13 role in making sure that things were done right. We were lucky during both Mercury and Gemini
14 that something similar didn't happen, because we were using the high pressure oxygen
15 atmosphere. Not high pressure, but fairly high pressure for oxygen. And I don't think anybody ever
16 realized quite what all the dangers were even though scientists, in hindsight, can say, "Oh Yeah.
17 What did you expect to happen when you do that?" The same thing happened during Challenger. .
18 .

19

20 Launius: Oh yeah.

21

22 Harris: . . . we'll get to that probably later.

23

1 Launius: Oh yeah. We'll talk about that.

2

3 {laughter}

4

5 Launius: You moved from Lewis to KSC in 1975.

6

7 Harris: Right.

8

9 Launius: What were the circumstances of that move? What job did you come down here to
10 take?

11

12 Harris: Well, I always enjoyed KSC and it certainly is a whole different atmosphere. As you
13 go from NASA Center to NASA Center even today you'd find that there's a whole different world in
14 each place. And the research centers are more collegiate in the way the people relate to each
15 other. And it's a much more, I don't want to say relaxed atmosphere, in that the people work
16 equally as hard day after day and in many cases overtime to do something, but they recognize that
17 the fruits of their labor may be years in the future. And maybe they won't even see them, because
18 science moves sort of incrementally one step at a time and it sometimes takes a long time to learn
19 just a little bit more that enables you to go in either a different direction, or further in the direction
20 you're going. In the case of development centers or operations centers and KSC is at sort of the
21 end of that chain, the development centers are oriented towards a need to get this developed and
22 built and ready to go. And it's a whole different atmosphere again from the research area, then
23 when you get to operations its even more of a pressing on to we've got to make this work no

1 matter what it takes. But...you generate probably more day to day excitement in that sort of
2 atmosphere which is the KSC atmosphere, and also there's probably not the recognition given to
3 the people at the operations area at KSC or wherever you have operations that's deserved,
4 because the people who do the development really don't know necessarily what the problems are
5 going to be and they don't necessarily look at how do you service this, how do you maintain it,
6 quite as carefully as you do where somebody has to do that particular task. So you find that here
7 at KSC you have tremendous advances being made in knowledge about how things should be
8 built and getting that fed back into the development centers is extremely important. But, anyway,
9 that didn't really answer your question.

10

11 {laughter}

12

13 Harris: I was interested in coming down. There were really two factors, 1) I mentioned the
14 different atmosphere at the research centers and. . . well actually it's a danger throughout NASA,
15 but it was more prevalent at the research centers, the perception that only a scientist or an
16 engineer could be a manager. Probably, there's only been one person that I remember who was a
17 Center Director who sort of didn't come that route and that was Dr. Sharp at Lewis. He was an
18 administrator type person. He was never an engineer and he was one of the few people who ever,
19 or maybe the only person, who ever became a Center Director that did not have a technical
20 background, and did an excellent job. But anyway, my chances of rising in the organization were
21 fairly small at Lewis past a certain point. For instance, the person who was the head of Public
22 Affairs there had been a scientist and worked in the electrical area, and that has continued
23 frequently, up until fairly recently. That did change at Lewis and has changed at other places in

1 the Agency. But here, I think, there was always a recognition that you really can be a specialist in
2 the public affairs world whether its in the news area, whether its in the VIP or protocol area,
3 whether it's in the education area. And that possibly somebody who was an expert in that area
4 might be suitable to be a leader in that area.

5

6 Launius: OK.

7

8 Harris: So that was one very important thing. The other one was strictly personal and that
9 was that I was divorced and my ex-wife was moving to Florida with my children, so it made it a
10 whole lot easier to visit them if I was in Florida, than in Ohio.

11

12 Launius: All right. That makes good sense. Was Kurt Debus still around and available when
13 you arrived?

14

15 Harris: I had known Kurt Debus somewhat from coming down...

16

17 Launius: Right.

18

19 Harris: ...through the '60s. He had left the Center and Lee Scherer was the Center Director
20 when I arrived. Although he had certain problems too because in the first week he was here he
21 was in serious accident and was knocked out for a while. Well, knocked out of working for a while,
22 but in any case he was the Center Director when I arrived. But certainly I heard lots of stories

1 about Dr. Debus. My relationship with him was one where I was visiting so he was never my boss,
2 so it was a different sort of relationship than you'd get from working directly with or for somebody.

3 Launius: How would you characterize the way Kurt Debus provided leadership versus Abe
4 Silverstein?

5

6 Harris: Well actually, I think there were more similarities than differences there. Abe
7 Silverstein was just a consummate engineer who had tremendous insight into how things worked,
8 or how he thought that they would work best and he made fairly rapid decisions at meetings based
9 on the information that was given him and whether something was a viable way to go as opposed
10 to another proposal. Also, he frequently would come up with something entirely different even
11 though he hadn't been necessarily thinking about it at the depth that the people doing the
12 presenting were doing. He also was very demanding, and very sharp. He was very critical of
13 people if he didn't think they had done their homework or weren't doing the job that they were
14 supposed to be doing. And, in the case of Dr. Debus, he also was a tremendous engineer who
15 had great insight into that sort of thing and, as you know, he had the concept for the VAB and how
16 you move around Saturn Vs. And there were a lot of studies that went into, for instance, putting in
17 a canal where you put Saturn Vs on a barge to take them out to the Pad, [and] around railroad
18 tracks and that sort of thing. So in some ways they were both tremendous engineers, and I think
19 that made their styles fairly compatible with each other. And they also were interested in what is
20 important. They didn't want to be bothered a whole lot with things that were unimportant because
21 they had very important things to think about and this is good from a management standpoint and
22 they say, "You go take care of it. That's your area, you do it." And Gordon Harris was the director
23 of Public Affairs for many, many years down here. Now, actually I competed for his job when he

1 left. Chuck Hollinshead was the one who got it. Of course, Chuck had been here and he was sort
2 of a known quantity to the people here. Also, he was tremendous person. I mean, he was one of
3 the best bosses I have ever had. And, then he hired me to come down and take his job. So that
4 was a really good time.

5

6 Launius: 1975 was the ASTP project.

7

8 Harris: Right, that happened about a month after I got here. So that's the first time I was in
9 charge of the press site was ASTP.

10

11 Launius: Was there a lot of interest in that? I mean, we hadn't flown Apollo since December of
12 '72.

13

14 Harris: Right. But we had....yeah there was a lot of interest and I don't know what the
15 figures were, actually, we have the figures here for how many press were here. But it was a lot of
16 interest. In those days we had some problems with the VIPs getting into the press site area,
17 because one of the VIP sites was so close, but that was a minor thing. But I think people were
18 very interested in whether this cooperative venture with the Russians was really going to work. I
19 mean we all knew it was going to work. We'd been working on it for a long time. And I think that
20 people were unaware actually of the depth of cooperation that occurred in the sciences with the...

21

22 Launius: Right.

1 Harris: ...with the Russians which went on for many, many years and...I've always felt that
2 that might have been as much a factor in ending the cold war as some of the other political things
3 that happened, because there was, I think, a pretty good rapport that developed and a great deal
4 of respect between the various countries that were involved. Scientists are, I think, great
5 ambassadors from some standpoints in that their focus is entirely different. Rarely is it as self
6 serving as some of the political leaders might be.

7

8 Launius: Question?

9

10 Lee Snaples: Was it difficult or just strange to have grown up during the cold war. To have
11 served in the Army at a time when the expected foe was the Soviet Union and then find yourself in
12 1975, in effect, being a spokesman in talking to the press about this joint mission and having to
13 perhaps change your tone about them?

14

15 Harris: I don't think so. I never felt that there was any conflict there. Of course the
16 place that I was most likely to be sent to was Korea and was lucky that I wasn't sent to Korea at
17 the time.

18

19 {laughter}

20

21 Harris: Because almost everybody I knew was. But you're right, there was the threat
22 of communism and I don't think that presented any problems, certainly to me.

23

1 Dethloff: During the intermission in flight between Apollo and Shuttle, did you sense much of a
2 diminution of public interest and pressures in the public relations area?

3

4 Harris: Well, the...

5

6 Dethloff: Especially at KSC.

7

8 Harris: No, I don't think so. I really contend that the general public has maintained a high
9 level of interest ever since the very beginning. Now the news media interest goes up and goes
10 down with what's going on and that's normal. I mean, they're there to report on events that are
11 occurring and if you don't have very many events occurring there's not a lot to report on. And the
12 things that build, I mean NASA was doing a lot of things during that period in preparation for the
13 Shuttle, in flying things like Viking and other things. But whenever something was happening that
14 was the culmination of work that had been going on, I think the coverage was adequate and
15 widespread. But there never was a time, I think, when the public stopped coming, for instance,
16 here to see the Center, once it was opened. And the number of letters and phone calls, and that
17 sort of thing always stayed at a fairly high level and whenever we produced material, that was a
18 time when we were more proactive because probably we had more time. There always a hunger
19 for good material.

20

21 Dethloff: Had the new Visitor's Center opened? When you...in 75? I can't remember the
22 date.

23

1 Harris: Yes. The first, well when you say the new Visitor's Center, it was nothing like the one
2 we have now.

3

4 Dethloff: Yeah, I know.

5

6 Harris: But...

7

8 Dethloff: Out of the trailer.

9

10 Harris: ...back in the sixties is the first time that the Visitor's Center was created. And I've
11 forgotten now . . .

12

13 Dethloff: '64 probably

14

15 Harris: Yeah. And part of one of the original buildings is still there although its hard to
16 recognize which pieces are, you know, incorporated. But...in those days, in the earlier days,
17 people could drive through the Center by themselves too. In addition to them taking a bus tour.
18 But the public, I think, has always had a high level of interest and one of the things our education
19 program, the NASA education program, has been a major factor in getting into the grade schools,
20 interesting teachers in what's going on and in helping them with materials and things,
21 tremendously important. It does not get the emphasis that it should get. You know, even when I
22 was a Director, the resources were not there to do as much as you really would like to have done.

23

1 Launius: There were a couple of rather spectacular planetary missions that were launched out
2 of here in the late seventies. Voyager and Viking.

3

4 Harris: Right.

5

6 Launius: Was there any special attention from those by the media or the public?

7

8 Harris: Oh yeah. Well, when people like Carl Sagan came down for instance he always got a
9 lot of attention. And for Viking, NASA Public Affairs went off to several cities, and with people like
10 Jerry Soffen and others, talked to the media about what was going on. And appeared on radio,
11 television that sort of thing. So there were again some things in the proactive area that were very
12 valuable I think.

13

14 Launius: OK. All right. One of the obviously big things that was working in the late seventies
15 and early eighties was bringing Shuttle on line.

16

17 Harris: Yep.

18

19 Launius: I'm sure it consumed almost everybody here. I guess the first question I would have
20 is, how did you all approach media relations with Shuttle? Was it anything different than what you
21 had been doing?

22

23 Harris: Quite different.

1 Launius: OK.

2

3 Harris: One of the things which I was unhappy with, well, I don't want to say unhappy. It was
4 felt it was not the right way to do it, was in the Apollo days the press was kept off of the Center
5 except when they were brought on usually in busses. Now some of the television type people had
6 to have different types of arrangements made and there was a lot of escorting. So when there was
7 a major launch, like the Apollo launches, a press building was rented down in Cocoa Beach and
8 phone lines, video lines, all sorts of special things were done. It cost several hundred thousand
9 dollars to do this. Plus... the press conferences were held there. And this was something actually
10 that the press liked quite a lot because they didn't have to go anywhere hardly. I mean they went
11 from their motel to the press center there and they got everything they needed. We brought
12 people to them. And whenever they had to come out to the Center then we provided an escort or
13 a bus or whatever and took them out and allowed them to see whatever it was that there was to
14 see. I always felt that that was a tremendous dilution of the resources, the people resources that
15 we had because you spent an awful lot of time running back and forth between the Center and
16 Cape Canaveral or Cocoa Beach, wherever you had the press center. And at one time Public
17 Affairs, the news operation of Public Affairs, was located down there in Cocoa Beach. By the time
18 I got here that had stopped. But in any case...I was one of the strong advocates for building a
19 press center out at the press site and for allowing the press to travel there by themselves. I mean
20 this was a serious problem for Security who didn't trust the press at all. And eventually we were
21 able to work out the badging, and that sort of thing, and they were allowed to travel out to the press
22 site and back and eventually we even got them permission to go to the cafeteria.

23

1 {laughter}

2

3 Launius: A major breakthrough there.

4

5 Harris: Yeah. And the Saturn V rocket was laying out. For the Bicentennial Celebration,
6 which you may recall, we put the Saturn V rocket out along the road right there by the Vehicle
7 Assembly Building and the Launch Control Center, which happened to be on the way to the
8 cafeteria. Originally Security said, "Oh, you can't go over to the rocket." It took a while before we
9 were able to negotiate that, but eventually it worked out. I mean, they went over there anyway and
10 then we would have to go get them from Security and it was it was a real pain. But anyway, we
11 changed the whole way that we did business with the press and we sort of made them come to us
12 rather than going to them in Cocoa Beach. And also, I think that, one of the things that I liked was
13 the feeling that the press got by being trusted to get to the press site without doing anything wrong.
14 And occasionally we had problems with wandering press getting into wrong areas or trying to push
15 the envelope to see how far they could get. But that was very, very rare and not a serious
16 problem.

17

18 Launius: OK. The first launch of Columbia in 1981. Again I think that there was an interest
19 from the public and from the media which essentially reflects I think the interest from the public . . .

20

21 Harris: Oh sure.

22

1 Launius: . . . that we had seen since the days of Apollo. What do you recall, anything in
2 particular about those incidents and what took place here during that time frame.

3

4 Harris: Oh yeah. That was certainly a very hectic time and we actually probably had more
5 press than we had for most of the Apollo missions and I think there was more than actually for
6 Apollo 11 here. Yeah, there was a tremendous amount of interest. People came from a lot of the
7 smaller towns and the smaller publications as well as the major cities, whereas ...in between
8 Apollo and Shuttle, I think there was somewhat of a change in that smaller newspapers and radio
9 stations and television of course changed a lot during that period, too. Felt that they really didn't
10 have to rely on some expert from a network or from one of the majors...

11

12 Launius: That they could cover it themselves.

13

14 Harris: . . . and that they could cover it themselves and the wire services. I had a somewhat
15 different attitude when I took over the press site too, than what had been during part of the Apollo
16 program. That had changed when, well Jack King had been the head of the press site during the
17 Gemini and early Apollo and then Chuck Hollinshead took over and then I took over from Chuck.
18 And Chuck was more of [the] mindset that I had, and Jack, who had come from a wire service, felt
19 if you told the wires you told everybody. I felt that everybody should be called and told who wanted
20 to know. And told directly when there were changes or something happened and that sort of thing.
21 Chuck was about halfway in between, with calling most everybody, but it wasn't quite as extensive
22 as what I insisted on. So neither one, I mean you can't say that anyone was wrong. It was just a
23 different atmosphere, sort of, that happened. And I think that paid some dividends in the interest of

1 the people and how they felt about their reception here and how NASA felt about them personally.
2 Which I think is tremendously important.

3

4 Launius: The public attention that the first Shuttle flight got. Is that, do you think, a reflection of
5 this great excitement about returning to space with people which we were doing after...

6

7 Harris: Oh yeah.

8

9 Launius: About six years. A new vehicle that, well I mean it's a totally different approach.

10

11 Harris: Well, whenever you have that, you have the people who want to be on the spot in
12 case something blows up. You know, whenever people are involved, there are certain dangers
13 that are there that aren't there when your not flying people. But the Shuttle was a tremendous leap
14 forward in technology in that was the first one that was going to be reusable. And in the past you
15 had launched these huge things into space and all you got back was a little package, maybe filled
16 with people, but nevertheless it was a pretty small percentage of your total vehicle. And in the
17 case of the Shuttle it was quite different in that you were reusing a high percentage of what you
18 were sending up including the Solid Rocket Boosters...

19

20 Launius: Right

21

22 Harris: ...which people really, I don't think, ever realized like they might have. But yeah,
23 there was a tremendous excitement and a realization that we were getting back into space, and of

1 course people did not expect there to be the sort of length of time that's occurred between going to
2 the Moon and going to Mars, I think.

3

4 Launius: Right.

5

6 Harris: People thought, " Hey, we went to the Moon last year, this year we ought to be going
7 to Mars. Or we ought to be going at least further than, than just up into orbit." So there was some
8 of that and they recognized it was a stepping stone to other things. They just didn't know it was
9 going to be a very long stepping stone.

10

11 Launius: Yes. There is that. The Shuttle flights, I mean initially in the early '70's, this was
12 before you had these responsibilities, but in the early '70's they were talking about 50 flights a
13 year.

14

15 Harris: Oh yeah.

16

17 Launius: Now that had been reduced significantly by the time the Shuttle starts to fly, but they
18 were still talking about relatively routine flights, you know 15 to 20 I think a year.

19

20 Harris: Oh absolutely. Yeah.

21

22 Launius: How, as a person who would have to deal with media, public, and so forth, how are
23 you going to hope to try to handle that?

1 Harris: Well, I always handled it from the standpoint that you know you've got to go at the
2 pace that the technology allows you to go. And you know, if we can only launch 4 or 5 a year, then
3 that's how many there are going to be launched. And when we can get to 12 or 16 or whatever
4 they were forecasting, and at the time I retired I had some of those charts that showed a lot, you
5 know like 20, more than 20 a year that were left over from earlier days. But I think that people say
6 well you didn't do what you said you were going to do. But on the other hand, people are fairly
7 savvy in recognizing that you probably have to crawl before you walk, and walk before you can
8 run. Obviously Challenger brought that back very quickly to people. And there hasn't been, I don't
9 think, the same sort of pressure or concern about that since then.

10

11 Launius: We want to talk about Challenger obviously. It's the most public crisis that NASA has
12 had and maybe the most serious one, and clearly a very tragic one with 7 astronauts being lost.
13 What was your experience at the time? I mean you were working the launch obviously. Was there
14 anything special about it? There was obviously was going to be a teacher aboard so that made it a
15 little bit different and I think there was probably heightened media interest because of that.

16

17 Harris: Oh absolutely. By that time the media interest had gone way down.

18

19 Launius: Right.

20

21 Harris: I mean we were having instead of thousands of people, thousands of reporters, we
22 were having hundreds and sometimes if you took a look at how many of these are real reporters
23 you know you're talking about 50 or maybe 75. A lot of the people who are in the numbers are

1 technicians and other people who come with the network troops and stuff. And also reporters who
2 are not for huge publications, I mean philatelic reporters and that sort of thing. So the numbers
3 had gone way down and for that particular launch of course they came up somewhat and I can't
4 remember, I think it was around 500 or something that we might have had for the launch itself. But
5 within 24 hours we ended up with another thousand or so. And.... that's another story I'll tell you
6 when we're not on camera. {laughter} But anyway. . . you know there was a lot more interest and
7 we certainly had a lot more calls and a lot more people. We had a lot of people here of course
8 from Christa McAuliffe's area and they did things for a period of weeks before the launch that were
9 different than we had had on some of the previous launches. So things really picked up for that
10 particular one.

11

12 Snaples: Let me ask. She was not the first. . . I don't see how to phrase this.

13

14 Harris: Civilian.

15

16 Snaples: Yeah. There had been a couple of congressmen?

17

18 Harris: Right. You'd had Senator Garn and you'd had Bill Nelson who is now a senator, but
19 at that time was a representative. There wasn't the same interest in them and I think that's
20 because people said the only reason they're flying is because they're in congress and they control
21 some of the purse strings.

22

1 Snaples: Had that been a problem for Public Affairs? I mean, had you seen more negative
2 press because of that?

3

4 Harris: Well there had been some negative press. But you know it wasn't, I didn't think that
5 bad. I think there was a certain lack of interest in them. But I think it paid big dividends in the
6 Congress and was probably fairly important to do that sort of thing. That's just you know probably
7 pretty lucky that one of them was not on Challenger.

8

9 Snaples: Right.

10

11 Harris: Bill Nelson. . . had some pretty hairy times in his particular flight too. But anyway, I
12 don't know whether that answers that entirely.

13

14 Snaples: Yeah. Yes. Yes.

15

16 Launius: Well where were you on the day of the launch?

17

18 Harris: Well I was doing the commentary so I was in the Firing Room.

19

20 Launius: OK. All right. As soon as the accident took place, I mean what was taking place in
21 the Firing Room? What happened?

22

1 Harris: Well I think there was a lot of sort of shock that occurred in the Firing Room. See
2 once the vehicle clears the tower, KSC really turns over control to JSC, and then [KSC's] job is to
3 make sure that everything is safe in the launch area and they get into a closing down mode. That
4 wasn't . . . I mean they had to go through that also, but then there was a bit of scrambling to decide
5 what else they probably should be doing. There wasn't a whole lot that could be done. I think you
6 know they kept the recorders going. People pulled out the contingency plans and started the
7 process there. One of the things that happened that was a serious problem as far as Public Affairs
8 was concerned and we should have known that . . . I mean, we had a contingency plan that really
9 provided for us to still have the resources that we would normally have like the tapes of the launch
10 and that sort of thing. The technical people had a contingency plan which didn't quite match our
11 contingency plan and they confiscated all of the tapes. And we had a serious problem with the
12 phone system, it went out almost immediately because of the volumes of calls that were on it. Now
13 Public Affairs was fortunate in having sort of our own system where we could talk to each other
14 somewhat and I said "copy the tapes immediately" because they're going to come and get them
15 shortly.

16
17 {laughter}

18
19 Harris: Anyway, they didn't ever accomplish that so we were left without some of the
20 resources. And because [practically] nobody was covering it live. I think there was only one. And
21 only one of the networks was actually doing any recording. The people were so used to us
22 providing everything that they weren't gathering, you know recording the feeds that they should
23 have been recording. And we had always, throughout the whole program, provided them with 20

1 different camera feeds that they could record and then with one edited feed which was suitable for
2 broadcast the way it was. Now they could edit anyway they wanted and they had all the raw
3 materials we had practically that we could give them. And they really came to rely, they just used
4 what we fed them. And they ended up with not having the resources too. So the TV stations in
5 particular had a serious problem. The print media had a serious problem in that management
6 decided not to allow the press to have access to their cameras. And because there might be
7 something on it that would contribute to the investigation. A terrible decision which we fought in
8 Public Affairs but we didn't win. And then in addition we could not get somebody, an official sort of
9 person, to the press site to talk to the press for 5 hours. . .

10

11 Launius: Really?

12

13 Harris: . . . or 5½ hours, I've forgotten exactly how long it was. And then also the other part
14 of the plan, our plan said that we would continue commentary so that there was somebody saying
15 here's what's going on. Not here's what went wrong. Nobody knew what went wrong. But here's
16 what's happening now, like for instance the Coast Guard has been called and the Air Force, etc.
17 and here's what we're seeing. You may recall that at the time, and I can send you a paper on this
18 if you want, Jim Beggs had been forced out.

19

20 Launius: Right.

21

22 Harris: Bill Graham . . .

23

1 Launius: was acting.

2

3 Harris: . . . was acting and he wasn't here. There was a new Associate Administrator for
4 Public Affairs who had only come onboard I think in December, although I've forgotten all of the
5 dates, and she really decided we would not continue with the commentary despite what we'd had
6 in the plan. We had had a planned management simulation of a disaster planned for the next
7 month, (which we didn't get to obviously) when this happened. That would have been a
8 tremendous help if we had actually had that because it was fairly specific in pointing out here are
9 the roles that managers play, like Jesse Moore and others in this particular thing. But in any case I
10 ended up running around to the various meetings trying to get somebody shaken loose to go over
11 to the press site. And the press were you know ready to riot because nobody was talking to them.

12

13 Launius: Yeah they felt they were being stonewalled.

14

15 Harris: Right. Now they basically saw everything in real time. It wasn't that there was
16 anything hidden. But it was very serious in . . . and did a lot to diminish goodwill that had occurred.
17 It also led. . . well it didn't lead so much, but the media organizations then assigned investigative
18 reporters to the story and a lot of reporters who had no idea what a Shuttle was. So we had a
19 serious problem in just educating, I talked a little bit about this before, in educating the media about
20 what part is this, when you hear this name what does that relate to and how does it all work
21 together. And we were unable because . . . everybody theoretically was working on the
22 investigation to get a senior engineer of any sort to come over and just answer simple questions
23 about how the thing was built. I brought in a retired engineer who became fairly famous at the time

1 because it was the only person we had who was a technical person who could talk about how this
2 stuff worked.

3

4 Dethloff: Who was that?

5

6 Harris: That was . . .

7

8 Dethloff: I'll get it later.

9

10 Harris: Yeah, it was on the tip of my head. I was going to mention his name when I was
11 talking.

12

13 {laughter}

14

15 Dethloff: I'm sorry.

16

17 Harris: Now it's flown out. But anyway and then NBC for instance hired Sam Beddingfield
18 who is another engineer as their personal person to advise them and some of the other networks
19 found other people to talk to too. Then the other thing that NASA did at Headquarters level was
20 say, "Every question had to come through Freedom of Information." You know a really stupid
21 thing. You know we were used to giving . . . I mean even, well, before and after, well when I was
22 in charge anyway. You know we didn't require the press to go through Freedom of Information for
23 anything. If it was available through Freedom of Information, it was available, and we'd give it to
24 them. You know we didn't go through the bureaucracy to do that. If there was a question as to

1 whether or not that was a public record or something then you know occasionally that would come
2 up. But we were the ones who worked it through the system. We didn't make them go through the
3 system. Well we taught them how to use the system real fast when Headquarters said,
4 "Everything's going to go through the Freedom of Information." It was a nightmare. So we had a
5 real problem with that sort of thing. And it took us a while to get the film released. And, of course,
6 the New York Times filed a lawsuit on that as well they probably should've. And we were able to
7 resolve that eventually. . . Public Affairs brokered, [what] I feel is a real diplomatic coup, an
8 agreement between the media and the management whereby if the media signed a, well it was
9 sort of a release sort of thing, that said in the case of a catastrophic accident that, in return for
10 getting their film immediately, they would provide either an original or a good copy back to NASA to
11 use. So. . . finally we got management to agree to that and we were able to by the next launch,
12 but we're talking a couple of years . . .

13

14 Launius: A couple of years there. Yeah.

15

16 Harris: . . . before we were able to get that to happen. Anyway there's a whole lot in there.
17 One of the things that I was very disappointed in which you probably, I don't whether you want on
18 your on your tape or not, is that at the time I retired I felt that there had not been an adequate
19 "lessons learned" done from Challenger. And I had actually planned to do it, but as you may recall
20 Mr. Goldin said, "If you don't take the buyout this time you don't get it next time" sort of thing. And
21 since I was getting close to retirement, well I was past 65, I decided well, you know if he doesn't
22 care then why am I caring so much. So I told the Center Director that there were two things that I
23 needed to do. One of them was a better "lessons learned" on Challenger and I'd be happy to do

1 that after I retired at no cost to the government. And the other thing had to do with the chroniclers.
2 Which I mentioned before which is the thing that honors news media.

3

4 Launius: Right.

5

6 Harris: And I got back a letter later when I started to. . . when I asked permission to use the
7 computer to work on it because I didn't have one at home at the time, saying that "If the Center
8 decided to do either of those things that it was far too complex for a volunteer to do."

9

10 Dethloff: Hmm.

11

12 Launius: OK.

13

14 Harris: So. . .

15

16 Launius: Both of those would be useful documents.

17

18 Harris: Well, I have done a couple of speeches for the United Nations in which I use the
19 Challenger as an example. And in the case of the United Nations, they had me speaking to
20 nuclear groups, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the I-A-E-A, I've forgotten now what the
21 call letters are. Anyway, so I spoke in Vienna and in Japan to groups that were, and also
22 Milwaukee but that was not the international group, it was the national group. So I did produce a
23 speech that is about 30 to 40 pages long. If you're interested in having it. . .

1 Launius: You bet!

2

3 Harris: . . . I'll be happy to . . .

4

5 Launius: Absolutely.

6

7 Harris: . . . send that to you.

8

9 Dethloff: Yeah. Can we get one in the archives too?

10

11 Launius: Yeah. And there's . . . I mean we can talk more about that. But those are lessons
12 learned. And you're not the only person in NASA Public Affairs who's said that needs to be done.

13

14 Harris: You know I spent years afterwards urging Headquarters to do more. Well, we did
15 produce a new contingency plan which was pretty good at the time. And then I wrote an
16 addendum for television, which wasn't in there because of the sensitivities that came up when we
17 ran some simulations and but was never, that part was not really I think officially incorporated. But
18 the thing that we had the biggest problem with during Challenger was that the Public Affairs
19 contingency plan was not referenced in the other contingency plans and didn't have the same kind
20 of numbering system and all that sort of thing. Afterwards we pretty much corrected that but I
21 never was satisfied that it was corrected as well as it should have been. And long before now,
22 Headquarters had promised 10-15 years ago now that they were going to do a new one and to
23 make sure that it got into all of the right documents. Well that never happened as far as I know.

1 Although something could have happened since I retired, but I haven't heard of it and I probably
2 would have heard of it.

3

4 Launius: Yeah.

5

6 Snaples: Earlier. . . oh, go ahead.

7

8 Dethloff: Did Challenger change drastically, and for a long time relations between NASA public
9 relations and the media and the public in general?

10

11 Harris: Well, it's hard saying with the public in general. I don't think it changed the
12 relationship with the public in general a lot. I think the public is actually, you know a lot more
13 understanding than people give them credit for. They understand that you know things go wrong
14 and that there are accidents and while there's always a certain element that says this is terrible;
15 everybody in NASA was an idiot and it shouldn't have happened. I mean most people accept that
16 in a high tech sort of thing that things are going to happen. And the media on the other hand as I
17 eluded to before, I think they were probably even more vocal from the standpoint that they felt
18 guilty and there's some of that that's captured in a conference we had I think it was AIAA or triple A
19 in Philadelphia that I took part in, that was a year or so after it happened. Anyway, it was the first
20 time that I think any of us were let out to . . .

21

22 {laughter}

23

1 Harris: . . . to really talk about that. But anyway they did publish a report with everything that
2 we all said in that. Which in that. . . talking about Jules Bergman, that's where Jules Bergman
3 attacked Scott Carpenter for being an idiot and had nothing to do at all with what we were talking
4 about.

5
6 {laughter}

7
8 Harris: I felt really badly about that because I had a good relationship with Jules and also
9 with Scott, but probably to a lesser extent because I didn't see him as often. But I sort of felt that
10 here I am being a traitor by you know talking to Jules. But anyway in the case of the press, now it
11 changed dramatically, very rapidly. Now I think that we recovered from that relatively quickly. But
12 it was a major problem for maybe a year at least and in some cases forever in the minds of the
13 reporters. Now some reporters lost their job over Challenger mostly on the basis that they weren't
14 aggressive enough. And . . .

15
16 Launius: In how they covered that particular story, or before hand?

17
18 Harris: Well, no. How they covered that particular story. And possibly you know there may
19 have been some of it beforehand, you know I didn't hear what the editors said to the particular
20 reporters.

21
22 Launius: Yeah. It would be easy to . . .

23

1 Launius: Oh, we need to wrap it up. OK.

2

3 Harris: She's running out of tape.

4

5 Launius: She's running out of tape. That's right. We really do need to talk to you again, if
6 that's agreeable.

7

8 Harris: Yeah, that's OK.

9

10 Launius: We'll have to schedule . . .

11

12 Harris: I have strong opinions about most things.

13

14 {laughter}

15

16 Launius: . . . another time. Well that's a good thing actually.

17

18 Dethloff: That's what we want to hear.

19

20 Launius: That's a good thing.

21

22 Dethloff: That's right. That's right.

23

1 Launius: I mean it would be easy I think for an editor to say, “Why didn’t you see this coming?”
2 in the same way that a lot of people looked at our engineers and said, “Why didn’t you see this
3 coming?”
4

5 Harris: Yeah. Now I can tell you that in the Firing Room there was no hint of what had gone
6 on in the discussions between Marshall and Thiokol which then everybody said, “Well they should
7 have known.” You know we waved the flags and said this is awful. But that’s a story that is not, I
8 think, well understood. There are people who are saying that we should not launch practically for
9 every launch. I mean there are things that are not perfect on every vehicle and especially on the
10 Shuttle which has a lot of I mean a lot of things that can go wrong on. And of course nobody
11 expected it to be the solid motors that caused it.
12

13 Launius: Right.
14

15 Harris: Everybody thought for sure that it was the main engines. And even Abe Silverstein
16 had serious doubts. He did not think that those engines would work because of the high pressure
17 that they were operating at. He was very dubious about that. Of course he had retired long before
18 that so he didn’t have the latest information about testing and that sort of thing. But even very,
19 very bright people had some problems with those things. But anyway, I’d be happy to talk to you
20 any time.
21

22 Launius: Great.
23

1 Snaples: And thank you very much sir.

2

3 Launius: Yeah, thank you. Do I have time for one additional comment?

4

5 Background voice: Yes. One minute.

6

7 Launius: One minute. Jim Beggs, I did an interview with him and he said, "If I'd been in
8 charge, I wouldn't have let them launch." And he says, "I could've just looked out on that gantry
9 and seen those icicles hanging off and I would've said we can't do this. It wouldn't have been
10 based on any technical data." Were there any. . . did you recall any discussions like that?

11

12 Harris: The only people who objected was Rockwell based on the icicles possibly falling and
13 impacting the Shuttle.

14

15 Launius: OK.

16

17 Harris: And then once they determined that that probably wouldn't happen, they gave their
18 go ahead also.

19

20 Launius: OK.

21

22 Harris: But basically nobody. . . I mean people I think were a little leery about it, but you
23 know the Launch Director heard every single person that reports to him say that they were go.

1 Launius: OK.

2

3 Harris: So he had no choice really other than he could have said, "I don't feel right about
4 this." And probably for the rest of his career he would've been called a chicken.

5

6 Launius: OK. Thank you. We appreciate you coming over today and we will have to talk to
7 you some more.

8

9 Harris: OK. Well anytime.